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*Howard Barker's 'monstrous assaults': eroticism,
death and the antique text*

Graham Saunders

In a 1994 essay, 'Murders and conversations: the classic text and a contemporary writer', the dramatist Howard Barker addressed what he called 'conversations with dead authors',¹ and asked 'what compels an author – at various moments in his progress – to engage in this literary necrophilia? ... [within] the charnel house or the pantheon of European drama'.² Such dialogues have been a long-running strand throughout his work and have included (*Uncle*) *Vanya* (1992), Barker's reconception of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1900); and *Minna* (1994), his take on Gotthold Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767). Yet it has been Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies that have most occupied Barker (albeit intermittently) throughout his career. The first encounter began with a BBC radio play, *Henry V in Two Parts* (1971), while the style and content of early plays such as *Cheek* (1970) and *No One Was Saved* (1970) saw his inclusion among a group of playwrights termed by John Russell Taylor 'the New Jacobean'.³ Others, including Edward Bond, Peter Barnes and Howard Brenton, shared features that Russell Taylor identified as a self-conscious theatricality, a fascination with violence and the grotesque and an anarchic sense of black humour.

However, it was not until 1986, and Barker's self-styled 'collaboration' with the Jacobean playwright Thomas Middleton in the rewriting of *Women Beware Women* (c.1612–27), that his work directly engaged with the drama of this period. These encounters have continued over nearly a twenty-year period and have included *Seven Lears* (1989) and most recently

Gertrude – The Cry (2002), a reconception of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1601).

However, Barker's engagement with classic texts does not express any comforting agreement with their professed 'universalism' or liberal humanist values. Quite the contrary, in fact: for Barker, locked deep within the architecture of the classical text lurks material that potentially offends what he calls our present 'age of social hygiene'.⁴ Such material is elusive, however, existing between half-glimpsed interstices and significant absences. Crucial to this, classical texts – and here Barker refers only to tragedies – are potential repositories for *secrets* which can profoundly repulse and disturb received ideologies upon which contemporary society relies. Yet the texts themselves do not give up their secrets so easily. Barker's approach has been to carefully expose and extrapolate significant gaps in order to 'glimpse the original for the frail and naked exposition of feeling, tender and afraid'.⁵

These acts of exposure through rewriting include a new ending given to *Women Beware Women*; the restoration of the missing queen in *Seven Lears*, who, as Barker notes in reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear* (c.1604–5), 'is barely quoted even in the depths of rage or pity';⁶ and an exploration of transgressive female sexuality in *Gertrude – The Cry*.⁷ These plays, while still related to their classical sources, go beyond the palliative measures of adaptation or ideologically driven 'corrective' readings. Out of this state of benign neglect, 'consigned to the realms of cultural archaeology' through the process of canonisation, Barker's rewritings attempt radical acts of reclamation, ones that seek to 'identify the pleasures and dangers of the classical text'.⁸ By 'dangers', Barker refers chiefly to the liberating, yet potentially destructive, *eroticism* that lies inert within these plays. The new texts, by being tangentially related to the old, attempt to impel enervating new forms of desire that have formerly been repressed. Suppression might have come through direct censorship by the authorities at the time (as Thomas Middleton points out in his fictitious 'conversation' with Barker⁹), or be the result of self-imposed censorship by the dramatists themselves. This, together with the forces of history following the Enlightenment, can lead to a play such as *King Lear*, which began as a fractious and deeply troubling work, being reduced to what Barker calls a 'placid story'.¹⁰

The repression in Shakespeare's *Lear* can be sensed in his misogynistic outbursts in response to female desire ('Down from the waist / They're centaurs, though women all above.' IV.v, 120–21),¹¹ and its political consequences through the outbreak of civil war, during which Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan vie for Edmund's sexual attention. As with the ending of Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, female sexual appetite is shown to lead to destruction. Shakespeare the moralist in *King Lear* even displays onstage the bloody knife and the two dead sisters as a warning and an education to his audience about the dangers of unbridled desire (V.iii, 195–209). Yet this capitulation to a prescribed form of morality pulls against the play's more radical impulses that question ideas of leadership and monarchy. Barker calls the ending of *King Lear* 'smothered genius',¹² and in his prequel *Seven Leirs* the patent artificiality of the moral order Shakespeare imposes becomes far more understandable through the introduction of Lear's queen, Clarissa: she is, Barker argues, although a speculative character, part of the architecture of *King Lear*; just as 'we have slowly re-learned that architecture is about emptiness as well as substance',¹³ her absence inhabits *King Lear* as a play. By comparison, the analogy of architecture to embody absence is used even more literally in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965), where the dead matriarch Jessie is mentioned in the same breath as the removal of a wall and a door in the family home following her death.¹⁴ Aspects of this figure also recur in the eponymous figure of Gertrude, discussed later in this essay.

The consequences of prescribed morality, together with historical processes that lead to inclusion within the canon, ultimately neuter impulses that can be thought of as radical forms of desire. Barker believes that Jacobean playwrights such as Thomas Middleton have never fully enjoyed acceptance in the pantheon of English drama because they somehow continue to transgress established order.¹⁵ Subsequently the forces of conservatism seek to resist such impulses – be it in the form of self-censorship on the part of the dramatist or state censorship by the authorities: either way, such constraints attempt to displace and smother what is potentially liberating or troubling to established moral order. Hence the elaborate mass slaughter that ends Middleton's *Women Beware Women* is, for Barker, 'transparently inauthentic',¹⁶ little more than an elaborate theatrical smokescreen that crudely attempts to reinforce a sense

of moral obedience among its Jacobean audiences. Such parroting of a conservative orthodoxy (such as the Cardinal's final speech, 'Sin, what thou art these ruins show too piteously ... So where lust reigns, that prince cannot reign long' V.ii, 224–7),¹⁷ which Barker describes as 'a genuflection of imagination to legality, a debt paid by an artist to a semi-tolerant state',¹⁸ paradoxically helps to reveal equally powerful contradictory moral forces. These are mostly played out in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* through the sexual relationship between the young clerk Leantio and the older aristocrat Livia; yet the liaison hints towards a form of sexuality that is not defined by the simple belief, forcefully articulated elsewhere in the play, that desire is synonymous with moral corruption.

In contrast, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* displays an almost constant *vigilance* for stirrings of unruly female sexuality. This is exercised most keenly on Ophelia, who becomes the focus of both her father's and brother's anxieties. Laertes, for instance, urges his sister to 'keep within the rear of your affection / out of shot and danger of desire' (I.iii, 34–5), while Polonius reinforces this advice, 'be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence' (I.iii, 121). Hamlet's simultaneous attempts to provoke Ophelia into a sexual response, together with his violent repression of it in the (in)famous 'Get thee to a nunnery' (III.i, 70–152) speech ultimately seem to drive her to madness; yet the snatches of bawdy song with which Ophelia regales the court show potential at any moment to become a conduit through which uninhibited desire might erupt.

Howard Barker's most realised expression of feminine desire as an enervating, yet destructive, force has been his reappropriation of the figure of Gertrude from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This reclamation of a well-known Shakespearian character also makes possible a reconsideration of well-known events that take place within the play. These include Gertrude's hasty remarriage to the king's brother Claudius so soon after her husband's death, but it is Hamlet's behaviour, and particularly the well-known expressions of disgust at his mother's new union, that give rise to the suspicion that Shakespeare is repressing something terrible: namely that Hamlet's misanthropy is nothing more than a futile attempt to block the new calling his mother now finds with Claudius. In Barker's *Gertrude – The Cry*, this is expressed through the moment of overwhelming sexual fulfilment known as the Cry: its presence in *Gertrude – The Cry* is exactly

that which is silenced (but hinted at) in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The Cry is first heard during Gertrude's involvement in the murder of her husband, an act Barker describes as 'a three way moment of ecstasy, intercourse and murder'.¹⁹ Significantly, in *Hamlet* the actual murder is never shown, but artfully choreographed via the Players' enactment of *The Mousetrap*. Yet its absence in Shakespeare makes the act even more compulsively fascinating, whereby in *Gertrude – The Cry* the inclusion of the murder becomes a new map by which to reinterpret *Hamlet*.

It also offers an alternative solution to T.S Eliot's famous essay 'Hamlet and his problems'; namely anxieties over what Eliot terms the missing *objective correlative*. Eliot argues that Hamlet's disgust at his mother's remarriage is not sufficient cause to set in motion the chain of events that leads to the tragic *dénouement* of the tragedy. Indeed, Eliot himself almost stumbles upon the buried objective correlative in his observation that had Shakespeare 'heightened the criminality of Gertrude [it] would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet'.²⁰ In turn, Barker acknowledged that Eliot's dissatisfaction with the play and his intuitive speculations on Gertrude's involvement in the murder of her husband led to his re-vivification of the queen as 'passionate, defiant and more authentically tragic than the adolescent prince himself'.²¹

Howard Barker has called *Gertrude – The Cry* his 'greatest play'²² and, more specifically, 'his greatest work on love'.²³ However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that *Gertrude – The Cry* emerges out of Barker's own long-running interrogation of *desire* within Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. In retrospect, the architect Krak's appalled question 'Where's cunt's geometry?'²⁴ in Barker's 1985 play *The Castle* is returned to over fifteen years later in *Gertrude – The Cry*, and, with it, the potential threat that female desire poses to established order. In his version of Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (written a year after *The Castle*), two principle themes which distinguish Barker's appropriation of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama are established – both the aforementioned nature of female desire and with it the fetishisation of the older woman.

With regard to the former, *Women Beware Women* becomes the theoretical basis of Barker's 'Theatre of Catastrophe', where the desire of characters such as Livia, Leantio and Sordido to experience forbidden knowledge leads to profound moments of ecstatic truthfulness. Nevertheless, this first

real engagement with Jacobean drama still displays vestiges of Barker's earlier incarnation as a 'political' dramatist throughout the 1970s. Here, Livia recognises that her coupling with Leantio has wrought changes that make her renounce her former life as a witty court schemer. Sexual desire and political transformation come together in Livia's Brechtian-tinged speech: 'The world hates passion ... All hate your lives and change the world!'²⁵ Barker's Cardinal also recognises that Livia's newly emergent selfhood represents 'another sex ... Something which unlocks the discipline of the civil state' (35). This culminates in a savage disruption of a public spectacle – namely the Duke and Bianca's marriage – through Sordido's rape of Bianca. This is not only a sexual attack, but also an assault on the state itself embodied through Bianca, who is complicit in what David Ian Rabey calls its 'voyeuristic pageantry'.²⁶ Livia sees Bianca's personal salvation coming out of her rape by Sordido, but it will also have politically liberating consequences whereby Sordido's savage act of violation will 'rock the state off its foundations, which is erected on such lies as ducal marriages' (51).

Barker's next engagement with the drama of this period was with Shakespeare. In *Seven Lears*, a prequel to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and written three years after *Women Beware Women*, the impulse that drives sexual transgression towards liberating political change is absent. Here, the adulterous affair between Lear and his wife's mother is shown through a seven-part process that transforms the idealistic young king with an innate need for justice at the beginning of the play to the politically corrupt figure of the ending. At this final incarnation, Lear is ready to step from the Barkerian stage onto the Shakespearian one. Prudentia is the very antithesis of Livia in Barker's version of *Women Beware Women*, who challenges Leantio by pointing out that 'my flesh is not a pond to drown your fears in' (50). In *Seven Lears* such advice is disregarded and the potential of desire as an agent for political or moral revelation lost through Lear's blind sexual obsession for Prudentia. In Barker's rewriting, Lear's infatuation for his wife's mother becomes part of his political mis-education.

These countervailing strands between moral liberation through the erotic as well as its capacity to corrupt distinguish Barker's interrogation of classical drama from this period. Partly this comes from his observation that, because of its smothering ubiquity in contemporary western culture,

the pornographic obliterates the erotic.²⁷ This is why Prince Hamlet in *Gertrude – The Cry* mistakenly locates the source of his mother's sexuality entirely by the length of her skirt, provoking his grandmother Isola's derision: 'He thinks a short skirt's sex' (24).²⁸

As mentioned, an exploration of the erotic's potential to disrupt order is a recurring theme through Barker's conversations with Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In *Gertrude – The Cry*, Isola – the former queen – engineers her daughter-in-law's downfall by corrupting the nature of her sexual ecstasy. Like many of Barker's characters, Isola's attitude to Gertrude veers from wonder to hatred. Consequently, Isola both understands her son Claudius' infatuation and by inference the need to murder his own brother for possession of the Cry. Yet Isola also wishes to corrupt this source of passion and attempts to inveigle Gertrude into sexually betraying Claudius with the young Duke of Mecklenburg. Gertrude recognises these attempts at subverting her powerful sexuality into the mundane. This is made evident in the scene where Gertrude calls for her 'PROSTITUTE'S COAT' (38). Again, this is reminiscent of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, in which the powerful eroticism that the figure of Ruth displays both fascinates and appalls the all-male household she inhabits. Their solution is to break Ruth's power by setting her up as a Soho prostitute – what Gertrude calls 'my vocation' (39). There is a sense in both *Gertrude* and *The Homecoming* that a fragile boundary exists between the power that resides in the erotic and its potential to be despoiled.

This corruption is also shown in other ways. Just as Lenny in *The Homecoming* is obsessed about the origins of his own paternity, Claudius also challenges his mother – who he calls 'a whore in her own time' (50) – to name his brother's father. Isola, too, is reminiscent of the dead matriarch Jessie from Pinter's play, who is described as 'a slutbitch of a wife' by her husband (25). Barker sets up an extreme juxtaposition between Gertrude's power to kill men 'with those legs inside those stockings' (35) to the tawdriness of her prostitute's coat that is 'belted / To draw a line at violation ... And thin / To hint at poverty' (39). The presence of this item of costume onstage makes clear the difference between the erotic and the pathetic tawdriness of the sexual transaction. This echoes Livia's belief in Barker's version of *Women Beware Women* that 'the world hates passion. Fornication's all its taste' (34).

Gertrude also marks a break in the relationship between the libidinal and structures of political power that occupy *Women Beware Women* and to a lesser extent *Seven Lears*. Instead, one gets the impression that Barker is more concerned with revealing moments of terrible ecstasy within *Hamlet* – moments that have become obscured by history, theatrical tradition and canonisation. It is the sexually transgressive figure of Gertrude who not only reveals these formerly buried impulses within *Hamlet*, but also comes to represent Barker's current thinking on the relationship between the erotic and death. Whereas his fictional 1986 conversation with Thomas Middleton is tinged with a sense of utopianism whereby his version of *Women Beware Women* 'insist[s] on the redemptive power of desire',²⁹ by the time of *Gertrude – The Cry* in 2002, the erotic has become a terrible and destructive force. Andy Smith (with reference to Julia Kristeva) terms the figure of Gertrude 'the "death mother", poised between *Eros* and *Thanatos*'.³⁰ In fact, as the play progresses the shift is irrevocably towards the death drive.

This is made explicit in the opening scene where Gertrude and Claudius copulate over the expiring body of her husband. Here, the erotic does not reside in the act of sex itself, but rather the moment of old Hamlet's death being its catalyst. While this scene is highly 'Barkerian' in its merging of both violent and erotic imagery (alluded to in young Hamlet's grim joke that Gertrude 'choked' his father 'with a view'),³¹ the physical representation of erotic ecstasy – Gertrude's 'Cry' itself – is both highly ambiguous and complex. It both represents Barker's latest thinking concerning the relationship between erotics and death while also revisiting several of the key ideas from *Women Beware Women* and *Seven Lears*.

For instance, Livia's assertion in *Women Beware Women* that 'desire's truth' continues through Gertrude's refusal to fake the Cry for her lover's gratification (22), yet its origins also lie in cruelty. Gertrude recalls that she first heard the Cry as a child when her mother-in-law Isola, the former queen, would couple with one of her subjects while his blind and crippled wife was forced to listen to the infidelity taking place (21). In a moment of brutal clarity, Gertrude recognises that betrayal – such as her later unfaithfulness against Claudius – is the destructive origin of the Cry (44). But the Cry is at its most intense in the presence of death; and Gertrude's two most intense ecstasies come from the death of her husband old Hamlet,

and her son, the prince. At this latter point Gertrude is less of a Kristevian 'death mother', and more subject to an overwhelming erotic force that leads to the destruction of others. As Gertrude's servant Cascan asserts, 'All ecstasy makes ecstasy go running to a further place ... Eventually it lures us over a cliff' (10–11). This speech, delivered immediately after Claudius and Gertrude have murdered old Hamlet and experienced the Cry for the first time, foretells of the catastrophe to come. By now, the intercession of Claudius is no longer necessary (80), and death is no longer in equilibrium with the erotic: it now holds sway completely in what Barker sees in his erotic writings as 'the erotic secret of tragedy', namely 'those moments of immaculate exposure to seduction/destruction'.³²

Here it is interesting to compare Barker's current thinking about the nature of desire with his 1986 version of *Women Beware Women*. In this play, the Cardinal names 'another sex' (35) for the relationship between Livia and Leantio, and which is contrasted against the rapacious sexuality of Middleton's/Barker's Florence. This can be attributed in part to the political and social climate of Britain in the 1980s, with the production at the Royal Court taking place at the height of Thatcherism's economic reforms. Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*, the major play of the following year, revealed a clear vogue for 'city comedies' that drew from history in order to comment on what Barker in 1986 called 'a money and squalor society'.³³ However, by *Gertrude* in 2002 not only has the relationship between societies based on power, sex and money entirely disappeared from his work but in its place a more private and profoundly *tragic* relationship has taken its place, based on what Barker calls 'the prospect of personal destruction'.³⁴ This stands in opposition to Aristotelian tragedy, which fulfils a quasi-social function of pacifying and morally assuaging its audience. In Barker's plays, the tragic is always profoundly disturbing because it is predicated on 'the threat of annihilation that hovers about the margins of all passionate encounters'.³⁵ With the possible exception of Sarah Kane, Barker is almost unique among contemporary dramatists in his desire to interrogate the disturbing yet transformative qualities that can be found in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy.

By the time of *Gertrude – The Cry* and, later, in his 2005 book *Death, the one and the art of theatre*, Barker had refined what he believes to be the inviolable secret of classical tragedy: namely the relationship between

eroticism and death. Like many of the tragic protagonists of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Barker's characters venerate death because of an innate recognition that 'tragedy ... intends no good to man. But intending no good to him, it enhances him.'³⁶ Because modern theatre has 'ceased to make death its subject', it has resulted for Barker in a 'surrender[ing of] its authority over the human soul'. Instead, it has become involved with 'mundane projects of political indoctrination and social therapy'³⁷ that are opposed to the very nature of the tragic experience. Barker criticises modern theatre's 'hatred of the dark, the obscure, the unexplained, above all the private, the enclosed, essentially that which disdains justification, function, utility'. However, the one thing that defines modern culture above all else in Barker's eyes is 'its loathing of a secret'.³⁸ We can also add to this Terry Eagleton's observation that tragedy with 'its ontological depth and high seriousness ... grates on the postmodern sensibility ... As an aristocrat among art forms, its tone is too solemn and portentous for a streetwise, sceptical culture.'³⁹

However resistant modern 'streetwise' culture might be to tragedy, it still has its own venerated subjects – chief among these is the enshrinement of youth. It is significant that Barker's *Women Beware Women*, *Seven Lears* and *Gertrude – The Cry* stand as provocative refutations to this ethic through their insistence on the erotically desired older woman. This radical reorientation of female sexuality not only sets out to puzzle and offend contemporary sensibilities but does the same to received opinion from the Elizabethan and Jacobean age. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the Prince's disgust at Gertrude's remarriage is also mixed with a sense of bewilderment that his mother still desires and is desired: 'You cannot call it love; for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble / And waits upon the judgement' (III.iv, 69–71). In Middleton's *Women Beware Women* this bafflement is replaced by stern moral warnings and finally retributive punishment. At one point the Mother tells Livia a story concerning a woman of 'nine-and forty' who had been robbed by a former younger lover as 'fair warning to all other women / That they live chaste at fifty' (II.ii, 169–70). Livia's murder in the final scene only serves to underscore what happens to women who attempt to go against the natural order of things.

However, Howard Barker aims to completely overturn this mixture of disgust and bewilderment. For instance, in his version of *Women Beware*

Women Leantio proclaims, 'no woman under forty is worth entering!' (32). This rejection of youthfulness – the coltish Isabella in Barker's version is described by the Ward as 'full of grimy sweetness, like a toffee left in pockets' (36–7) – is born out of a recognition that the state attempts to impose its ideologies quite literally through control of the body politic. Barker argues that youthfulness as an ideal is synonymous with the practicalities of fecundity, but in making youth its ideal, the state 'effectively locates sexual charisma at the shallowest point'.⁴⁰ In *Gertrude*, even this shibboleth of youth and fertility is ruptured when the queen's transgressive powers of the erotic reside in her pregnancy at the age of forty-three.

Barker also makes the important distinction between *beauty* and *desire*. In *Arguments for a Theatre* he points out that it is manifestly foolish to believe Homer's account of Helen's physiognomy provoking the Trojan War: 'a beautiful woman cannot launch a thousand ships, whereas we suspect a desirable woman might.'⁴¹ This is recognised by the Cardinal in Barker's *Women Beware Women*, who sees in Livia and Leantio's public displays of rebellious carnality a challenge to the status quo – 'Let the population copulate ... whelps and growls from upper storeys ... satisfaction and quiescence everywhere'. Instead, Livia's example 'might lever up whole pavements and turn fountains red' (35). Here, Barker draws attention not only to revolutionary change coming out of a recognition that desire extends beyond child-bearing age but also the perverse pleasure it affords by offending against the accepted order of things – such as Leantio deliberately choosing to 'lick experience out of [Livia's] wrinkles' rather than 'girls tight in their skins on every pavement!' (35).

Yet in *Seven Lears* Barker also shows the potential of such unions to produce a sense of sterility and neglect. Here, the affair between Lear and his mother-in-law Prudentia is shown as one of the milestones in his political corruption ('all wrongs are right with you' (22)) and the beginning of his descent into infantile madness. In contrast, his younger wife Clarissa is clearly shown to be the fittest to rule in his place.

The figure of Hamlet has also at times been appropriated into modern culture's obsession with youth, as with, for example, productions of the play during the latter part of the 1960s where characterisations of the Danish Prince drew upon aspects of the rebellious and hedonistic counterculture.⁴² Yet Hamlet's squeamishness over matters sexual, especially his dealings

with Ophelia, have never made this association particularly convincing. In *Gertrude – The Cry* Barker is keen to emphasise Hamlet's infantilism – for example, dressing him in the original 2002 production as an English public schoolboy – and the misogynistic repulsion towards female sexuality that is omnipresent in Shakespeare's play. Barker's Hamlet, described by his grandmother Isola as 'a bore and a prude' (23) exhibits these traits all too clearly during a soliloquy that takes place while examining the face of his dead father:

I expected to be more moved than this...

Never mind these things will come later when I least expect them
in bed with a bitch or on a horse eyes full of tears ... I'll get off the
bitch off the horse have you a handkerchief

(He laughs briefly)

Horses don't have handkerchiefs but bitches might to wipe their
crevices that stinks

I'll say stinks of filthy copulations am I to wipe my eyes with that yes
wipe away and fuck your finicky fastidious and

(He laughs, shuddering)

WOMEN ARE SO COARSE (13)

Andy Smith's analysis of this passage argues that it projects Hamlet's prudery and misogyny 'into the very *raison d'être* of the character',⁴³ and also serves as a nexus point between the two plays: here it would be easy to imagine the Hamlet of Shakespeare who speaks of 'the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty' (III.iv, 83–4) at the same time time discoursing about bitches and horses. In *Gertrude – The Cry* the underlying fear that motivates such outpourings is also realised in Hamlet's vision of Elsinore being rebuilt in glass. While this whim for complete exposure might at first seem the very antithesis of a prudish condition, it in fact confirms it. This is because, in Barker's reckoning, profound moments of erotic desire are engendered under conditions of darkness and secrecy. Just as the neon lights of modern cities have practically obliterated the stars in 'a dazzling scrutiny of transparency', for Barker modern society itself 'abhors the shadows' which are breeding grounds for the unsettling and the transgressive.⁴⁴

Hamlet's project to eradicate desire itself in *Gertrude* makes him literally an architect for what Barker calls 'The Illuminated Society'.⁴⁵ The endeavours to eradicate the potency of secrecy and darkness, elements that so permeate Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, also give rise to the profound moments of erotic power that trouble Shakespeare. But arguably it is these very qualities that succeed in making *Hamlet* one of the greatest tragedies of the western canon.

Yet the garrulous moralising of Shakespeare's Hamlet, while retained at the beginning of *Gertrude*, becomes progressively reduced to 'saying less' (54) as the full extent of his mother's terrible sexuality and abandonment of familial bonds reveals itself. Here one can detect the compulsive need that exists in so many of Barker's characters to speak truthfully. Hamlet himself realises that once he has moved beyond the 'purgatory of adolescence' (15), and with it the desire to simply shock, he will be more fit to rule. Gertrude also acknowledges 'an insidious attraction' as her son attempts to tread a precarious path within the 'maze of manners' (25) that sustains court life at Elsinore.

In this essay, I have tried to show that Howard Barker's engagement with Elizabethan and Jacobean drama has been an ongoing interrogation 'to identify the pleasures and dangers of the classical text'.⁴⁶ In *Women Beware Women*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, these spaces and evasions, as well as the half-glimpsed moments of profound erotic desire, are exposed by Barker in order to renew a sense of the tragic within a contemporary theatre that promulgates entertainment, social relevance and accessibility as its chief functions. John Russell Taylor's classification of Howard Barker as a 'new Jacobean' at the start of his career is perhaps more true now than it was back in 1971. Whereas Russell Taylor's use of the term denoted a tendency towards a dramatic style that was vivid, anarchic, violent and macabre, Barker has subsequently become Jacobean in far more profound ways. In his 1996 essay 'Love in the museum: the modern author and the antique text' Barker speaks about his encounters with Thomas Middleton and William Shakespeare as being akin to walking in a darkened room with 'powerful invisible allies in that devastating contest with new orthodoxies that characterizes the artistic life'.⁴⁷ Yet, writing elsewhere, Barker has also noted that the Jacobean playwrights, 'far from being [seen as] as great flourishing of the English genius', were in fact 'rapidly extinguished by

the Reformation and the subsequent waves of humanism, utilitarianism, socialism, Methodism, and all the moral enthusiasms that constitute the English soul'.⁴⁸ Considering Barker's own marginalised position in British theatre, it is not too much of an overstatement to place him in an analogous position with his Jacobean predecessors. While the late Sarah Kane's assessment of Howard Barker as 'the Shakespeare of our age' has been frequently cited in relation to his work,⁴⁹ in a formerly unpublished interview Kane also observed that '[i]n a few hundred years Howard will be like Shakespeare. No one will really understand what Howard Barker's done until he's been dead for a long time.'⁵⁰ The two assessments are both laudatory and pessimistic in that they seek to locate the work in a continuum begun by his Jacobean predecessors but also point towards his continuing neglect. Nevertheless, Barker's attempts to unlock the radical potential of erotics and desire within classical texts show that a more productive reassessment of these plays will have taken place.

Notes

1. Howard Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, 3rd edn (Manchester, 1997), p. 154.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 153–4
3. John Russell Taylor, 'British dramatists. the new arrivals', *Plays and Players*, 18 (1971), pp. 24–9.
4. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, pp. 182–9.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
6. Howard Barker, 'Introduction' to *Seven Lears* (London, 1990).
7. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 157.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
9. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 25.
10. *Ibid.*, p.155.
11. William Shakespeare, *The tragedy of King Lear*, in Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery (eds) *The Oxford Shakespeare: tragedies* (Oxford, 1987), p. 1298. Further references to *King Lear* and *Hamlet* will use this edition of the text.
12. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 155.
13. *Ibid.*, p.154.
14. Howard Pinter, *The Homecoming*, in *Plays: Three* (London, 1997), p. 29.
15. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 154.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, in Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor (eds), *Five Plays* (London, 1988), p. 286. All further quotations will use this source.
18. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 98.
19. Howard Barker, Programme Notes, *Gertrude –The Cry* (The Wrestling School, London, 2002).
20. T.S Eliot, *The sacred wood: essays on poetry and criticism* (London, 1922), p. 86.
21. H. Barker, Letter to Andy Smith. Cited in Andy Smith, "I am not what I was": adaptation and transformation in the theatre of Howard Barker and the Wrestling School,' in Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey (eds), *Theatre of catastrophe: new essays on Howard Barker* (London, 2006), pp. 48–9.
22. Howard Barker and Eduardo Houth, *A style and its origins* (London, 2007), p. 19. In a letter to Andy Smith, Barker has also commented, 'I regard *He Stumbled* and *Gertrude* as major works, and in this climate, revolutionary works.' See Gritzner and Rabey, *Theatre of catastrophe*, p. 53.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
24. Howard Barker, *Collected plays vol. 1* (London, 1990), p. 241.
25. Howard Barker (with Thomas Middleton), *Women Beware Women* (London, 1989), p. 34. All subsequent references to the play will use this source.
26. David Ian Rabey, *English drama since 1940* (Harlow, 2003), p. 185.
27. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 187.
28. In recent work, such as *Gertrude* and *Dead Hands* (2004), the female protagonist's penchant for wearing high stiletto heels locates the erotic in these fetishised objects. For a more detailed discussion see H. Iball, 'Dead hands and killer heels', in Gritzner and Rabey, *Theatre of catastrophe*, pp. 70–82.
29. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 25.
30. Smith, "I am not what I was"', p. 52. In much of her later work Kristeva identifies the maternal with Freud's notion of the death drive Thanatos. For an informative introduction to Kristeva's ideas in this area see Janice Doane and Devon Hodge's *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the 'Good Enough' Mother* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1993), pp. 53–78.

31. Howard Barker, *Gertrude – The Cry* (London, 2002), p. 17. All subsequent quotations will use this edition as its source.
32. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 160.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
37. Howard Barker, *Death, the one and the art of theatre* (London, 2005), p. 2.
38. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 171.
39. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet violence: the idea of the tragic* (Oxford, 2003), p. ix.
40. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p.195.
41. *Ibid.*
42. The best-known example being Peter Hall's 1965 RSC production with David Warner as Hamlet.
43. Smith, "I am not what I was", p. 50
44. Barker, *Arguments for a theatre*, p. 182.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
48. Howard Barker, 'The ethics of relevance and the triumph of the literal', in Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (eds) *(Dis) continuities: trends and traditions in contemporary theatre and drama in English* (Trier, 2002), p. 86.
49. Dan Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: an appreciation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 15(3) (1999), p. 280.
50. James Christopher, interview with Sarah Kane. Cited in Graham Saunders, *Sarah Kane: the playwright and their work* (London, 2009), p. 48.